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# New Immigrants Echo Nation's Diverse History

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# New immigrants echo nation's diverse history

Having just eaten our way through Thanksgiving and having watched our school children do a variety of activities dealing with the Indians and English settlers sharing the first bountiful harvest, we sometimes think that the English were the first Europeans to settle in what is now the United States. Nothing could be further from the truth.

This is regional bias. Yes, the first settlers here were from England and we trace much of our heritage from these earliest immigrants to this part of the country in what was to become the United States before its expansion to the West. But we need to remember that the South and Southwest had permanent settlements before the English, and the heritage of that early colonizing European nation still persists today in those regions.

The Spanish, not the English, were the first to settle permanently in what is now the United States. St. Augustine, in Florida, was established in 1565 but was abandoned for a period of time, so the first permanent settlement in the country was along the upper Rio Grande Valley, currently New Mexico, in 1598 by Juan de Onate. Santa Fe was founded in 1607 and became the capital of the territory in 1610, making it the oldest capital in the nation.

That Spanish heritage in New Mexico continues today where 39 percent of residents are Hispanic, highest rate in the nation, and well above the national average of 9 percent.

Unlike the early French explorers who came for personal gain, the Spanish came with the purpose of building settlements.

These took three forms: *presidios* were military garrisons; *missiones* were religious outposts, and *pueblos* were civil settlements for trade and colonization. Today the former *presidio* of San Francisco and the mission of San Juan Capistrano remind us of that past while San Jose and Los Angeles have changed considerably from their original purpose as *pueblos*.

Over time the English came to dominate the country and to incorporate and seize control of lands and their French, American Indian, Dutch and Spanish peoples. By the time of the first census in 1790, with immigration from the British Isles continuing, the population was close to 80 percent British, with the English comprising 60 percent. That first census also counted 19 percent of the population as African slaves.

From 1820, when places of origin for immigrants were first recorded, until the beginning of the Civil War there was a second wave of immigration, dominated by Northern and Western Europeans, with approximately 40 percent coming from Ireland. This rush of new immigrants brought with it a different faith from that of the early Puritans, and by 1850 the Roman Catholic Church was the largest denomination in the country.

There was a third immigration wave, starting shortly after the end of the Civil War, and continuing until 1914, this one domi-

nated by Southern and Eastern Europeans. In 1907,

for example, 81 percent of immigrants came from that area. That year also included the first large numbers of Jewish and Eastern Orthodox religions.

The first World War, quotas established in the '20s, the Depression of the '30s, during some years of which more people left the country than came into it, and the second World War all discouraged immigration.

After the war, legislation to admit displaced persons from Europe allowed

400,000 persons to arrive, and later refugees were admitted also. These groups, together with increased num-

bers of Mexicans who came after the war, provided for growth, but the fourth wave of immigration really dates from the mid-'60s when legislation changed the preference system of admittance.

Prior to 1965 preference was given by national origin, so Northern and Western Europeans were favored, but legislation that year changed preference to families being joined by relatives and persons with skills. As a result, about 80 percent of openings were given to immigrants joining their families and Asians, for the first time, were treated like other immigrants. By the '70s only 20 percent of immigrants were from Europe.

Today, the 2,200 legal immigrants that arrive daily and the 1,000 who illegally slip

across the border or overstay their visas overwhelmingly come from Asia and Latin America. In the period from 1980 to 1998 the Asian population has grown to 10 million, an increase of 179 percent; and the second largest increase of 107 percent to 30 million was registered by Hispanics. Combined with the American Indian and African American population, the minority rate of increase in this time period was twice that of the White population.

Immigration, together with the highest rate of fertility of any group, will make Hispanics the largest minority group in the country in another five years. And if Census Bureau projections are correct, by the year 2050 one in four persons in this country will be Hispanic.

So it is interesting to speculate on the future of this country, unique in the world because of the freedom and economic opportunity offered within the framework of a democracy, that was first settled by the Spanish, largely influenced by that culture in the South and Southwestern parts of the nation and now having a revival of that language and culture in many other parts of the country because of the increasing numbers of that population.

Variety and change in our population lend credence to what Foot and Stoffman say in their book entitled "Boom, Bust and Echo" that "demographics explain two-thirds of everything." And the change is only now starting to gain momentum.

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## Commentary

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